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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of the literature concerning discipline in the classroom, focusing specifically on the root causes of discipline problems and the development of problem-specific responses. A bibliography and suggestions for further reading are also included. (DS)

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Briefly on . . .

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no. 3

Classroom Discipline

ERIC Clearinghouse on Teacher Education--One Dupont Circle N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036

DISCIPLINE AND THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS: COPING IN THE CLASSROOM

Michael Butler*

The problem of discipline preoccupies school staffs. This situation has probably existed since the very first formal school and will more than likely exist as long as schools themselves.

One responsibility of formal education is to pass from generation to generation the substance of the moral order--the conglomerate of social values and social knowledge that enables people to live harmoniously in a group. The school system relies on a societal mandate to use authority in transmitting the essence of the moral order. Conflict arises, however, when the student questions either the teacher's perceptions of this social order or the legitimacy of the authority the teacher uses to transmit this message.

In what may be a rose-colored view of the past, social values and authority were much stronger than at present, and therefore the question of discipline in the classroom was of lesser import. A more homogeneous view of the values that society held prevailed. Social, political, religious, and economic goals, standards of self-conduct, and patterns of personal interrelationships were more regimented. Access to education was restricted to a much smaller portion of society, years spent in schooling were shorter, options available to youth who did not desire schooling were broad and varied, and the authority of school staff to deal with recalcitrance was much more extensive.

The school system's authority to command dogmatically, and students' duty to obey blindly, have been diminished--many people say rightly so. Traditional actions in loco parentis, physical and mental regimentation, grading systems are now much less acceptable. The question is how to elicit appropriate behavior from students so that the educational process continues, goals of self-development and social continuation are served, and the rights of all students and staff are respected.

The five most recent Gallup polls of public attitudes toward schools suggest a growing preference for greater control over the conduct of the young (Sussman, 1976, p. 1). Since schools are a reflection of society, it may be expected that the education system's response will be increasing attention to disciplinary control in the classroom. The effectiveness of this response will depend on an understanding of the root causes of discipline problems and the development of problem-specific responses.

SOURCES OF DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS

According to Diem (1976), discipline problems are mounting because the school no longer stands aloof from the community. In times past, education institutions remained somewhat apart from the rest of society, and acted in a relatively independent capacity as monitor, commentator, guardian, and guide. Now, however, the same forces causing society as a whole to change are causing the types of discipline problems schools now face--racial intolerance, drug use, and violence against personal and property rights.

From another perspective, the sources of discipline problems may be divided into

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three categories: the family, the social situation, and the organization of schools themselves. Familial factors giving rise to discipline problems include population mobility, divorce, increased child abuse, conflict between school and home philosophies, reduced psychological support, and negativism about school and authority in general. Social situations include mass communication (in particular television), unemployment (especially among urban minority youth), social emphasis on acquisition of material goods, racial hostility, and prolonged adolescent dependency. Contributing factors in schools include ill-defined purposes, centralized decision making, inadequate curricula, poor communication channels, staff fears, and the stress of grade competition (Disruptive Youth, 1977; Olivero, 1977; Parker 1978).

These pressures on students, coupled with a weakening of the school's traditional authoritarian powers, result in a continuum of disruptive behaviors ranging from excessive absences and tardiness to physical violence and the use of dangerous drugs and weapons. Midway along the line would be abuses of personal and property rights. Such behaviors demonstrate rejection of the teacher's capacity to play superordinate, the traditional definition of students' role, and the teacher's claim to serve educational goals (Metz, 1978).

The reactions are to some extent understandable. Students are young and generally immature, sexually energetic, in school by legal compulsion, with different levels and styles of academic and moral character and differing social and economic backgrounds, crowded together in highly regimented structures not of their choosing, and ordered about for six hours a day. The wonder is not that schools experience discipline problems, but that they function at all.

DEALING EFFECTIVELY WITH PROBLEMS

Responses to discipline problems fall along a continuum mirroring that of the problems themselves--from verbal warnings to in-class isolation, corporal punishment, in-school suspension, and out-of-school suspension. Effective methods for dealing with problems may be either preventive or curative, provided they deal with causes of the problems rather than symptoms. "Treatments" dealing solely with symptoms or manifestations of the problem might properly be labeled futile.

Sussman (1976, p. 72) developed a list of "should nots" for teachers in disciplinary situations. Teachers should not:

1. Use ridicule or sarcasm toward the offending student, since that response engenders alienation and humiliation
2. Give assignments as punishment, since that destroys the value of school work
3. Personally or publicly humiliate the student
4. Prolong the incident
5. Publicize the incident
6. Send the child to a lower grade
7. Penalize the entire class for an individual's actions
8. Force apologies
9. Allow chain reactions
10. Overpunish, and especially should not overuse physical punishment, since the student is taught thereby that domination is an acceptable and effective response to disruptive situations.

Positive suggestions are also needed. A list of "shoulds" gleaned from the literature on discipline could include:

1. Make every effort to understand the student's behavior before attempting to change it
2. Couple any explicit rules with clear consequences
3. Convey the fact that punishment is a representation of the power of authority, and the logical outcome of breaching the social order
4. Use positive reinforcement (or negative reinforcement properly applied) at the appropriate times
5. Overplan classroom activities so that all students are fully occupied
6. Underreact to disruptive situations if possible
7. Use firmness, kindness, and consistency with students

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8. Teach "self-responsibility" for behavior and its outcomes
9. Be willing to ask for help if needed
10. Realize a minimal amount of disruptive behavior will always be present.

Basic to any attempt by the teacher to deal with classroom disruption is an understanding of group behavior. It is widely acknowledged that teacher education has been remiss in providing preservice and inservice teachers with the skills to understand group interaction processes, including patterns of communication and behavior, group structure, group goals, and control practices.

In attempting to introduce behavior change the teacher ought not to try to destroy group unity, but rather to build on it, to appeal to it, to develop group pride, and to foster beneficial group action. Where classroom unity does not exist, the teacher should work to develop it and to promote behavior conducive to learning through pride.

In addition to techniques of group behavior analysis and group control, the application of techniques based on Glasser's reality therapy and the behavior theories of Adler and Driekurs has been successful in producing behavior change in disruptive students.

Glasser (1977) based his process on the belief that all children need to experience success, love, warmth. To promote experiences of success, the teacher should spend time throughout the day reinforcing positive behaviors. The teacher ought to concentrate on present behaviors, not on past actions or on feelings. Students should be induced to comment on their behaviors and form value judgments about their actions. They must also be involved in planning behavior goals and determining appropriate sanctions for misbehavior, to learn self-responsibility for acts meshing with or contravening the established order. In addition, the teacher should help students develop a sense of commitment through contract or handshake, and eliminate the discussion of excuses for misbehavior. Above all, the teacher must never give up--but must plan to hang in there longer than the student expects.

For Adler and his philosophical disciple Driekurs, behavior is often inappropriate because people do not know how to realize their goals (Sussman, 1976, p. 55). They saw children's behavior as predicated on a striving for attention, power, revenge, or excuse. Accordingly teachers' responses to disruptive behavior must be based on an understanding of the needs children are trying to fill, and must be appropriately channeled in order to be effective.

These techniques, as well as the others discussed earlier, are based on a philosophical position of dealing with root causes rather than symptoms: the student is not the problem, but must be worked with in order to discover and solve the problems. Attempts at remediating disruptive behavior must be directed toward the student and the problem, not toward the symptoms or observers (administrators, parents, fellow teachers, other students).

SUMMARY

Vredevoe asserted that 95% of any given group can be expected to observe the rules if they understand the rules (Sussman, 1976, p. 94). Many if not most of the discipline problems in education stem from an inability to communicate--on the part of parents, teachers, students, and administrators. The teacher should not merely assume the student does not know how to act, and should not off-handedly prescribe irrelevant or damaging punishment, but instead should attempt to identify the real problem and to develop effective responses (Sanders, 1977).

On the larger scene, until society begins to deal with the problems facing it, teachers will continually face disruption in the classroom. Once these societal problems are on their way to solution, through a partnership of school, home, and society, teachers can stop being guards and begin, once again, their fundamental task: to educate.

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